

# Off The Beaten Patch: Walnut Creek Wins By A Nose

*It's really a feast for all your senses.*

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Did you feel Sunday's earthquake? Did you see this morning's traffic? Did you hear the bands playing at the Walnut Festival?

Did you smell the rain? Yes, smell.

It rained here Sunday. It hasn't rained in months and, not five minutes after I went out for a run, it started. But even the overcast sky couldn't hide the clear smell. I closed my eyes and drew in one long breath and I instantly felt like I was in a Midwest field of dreams. There is something so distinctive about the smell of light rain that simply washes away my other senses.

The rest of my rain-soaked run, I was thinking about other everyday smells that to most people would be anything but enchanting – but to me hold almost magical powers.

A few come to mind.

I may be on a mission to find a parking spot between Broadway and Main, but every time I pass by The Original Hot Dog Place in the Stadium Pub, I'm instantly riding in the Back to the Future DeLorean, heading toward the 1960s. Just one hint of the indescribable aroma of an authentic Chicago-style hot dog and I instantaneously picture my 10-year-old self with my

Big Grandma (she was 5'2") and my brother going to Ruby's Hot Dogs off Devon Avenue on the North Side of Chicago. What a thrill it was walking past one red-bricked apartment building after another with sheer joy and anticipation of what was to come under the bright yellow Vienna Beef sign. "I see it! I see it!" my brother or I would yell as if we reached the Promised Land. And even before we took my grandma's hand to cross the busy street – we smelled it. That delicious scent of Kosher hot dogs, a warm poppyseed bun and fries just waiting for us in their little red plastic, wax-lined don't-throw-me-away baskets.

Diesel exhaust fumes. I know, for you, they're probably right up there with the smell of Napalm in the morning – but not for me. Call me crazy, but getting stuck behind a smelly bus doesn't send me fuming -- just the opposite. The billowing vapors remind me of being a carefree 25-year-old living in the South Coast of England. I didn't drive a motorcar and instead relied on my trusty bicycle to get me around town. I may be on South California in Walnut Creek, but in my mind, I'm pedaling along wearing my denim overalls, carrying a loaf of fresh bread, a hunk of English cheddar, a few aubergines and packet of chocolate biscuits in a straw bag bouncing side-to-side in the crooked wire basket.

There's no shortage of sweet smells coming from Broadway Plaza, but my favorite will surprise you. It's more romantic than Richard Gere cupping Julia Robert's face in *Pretty Woman* and Elizabeth Bennett provoking Mr. Darcy put together – and you'll find it inside Macy's. It's Classic Paco Rabbane cologne for men. No reason to explain why.

Some smells – like that of a baby's head or a puppy's breath -- are so indescribably amazing that they make even the strongest go weak at the knees.

And who among us doesn't think we are back in grade school with one whiff of paste? Or getting scolded for going in the 'secret closet' when you smell moth balls on a passer-by's wool coat.

Two weeks ago my Polish friend Gosia took me to one of her favorite restaurants – Chopin Polish Café & Restaurant next door to Lunardi's in Walnut Creek. Gosia's face lit up when our server brought us Kluski Slaskie w Sosie Pieczarkowyn (Potato Dumplings in mushroom sauce). And I understood why. It wasn't so much the taste -- which by the way was delicious – it was the smell. I could tell that Gosia had come to all her senses and was a dreamy 6,000 miles away in Poland, surrounded by her mom and cousins enjoying a Sunday dinner. She didn't have to say a word. I understood. It's the smell.

Which brings us back to the Midwestern-smelling rain.

I grew up in Chicago and I don't have to tell you how cold it is. You've all heard the stories but unless you've lived there – 27 winters for me – you have absolutely no idea what cold is. I remember one brutally frigid winter day where the wind chill factor was something like 60 degrees below zero. I must have been wearing seven layers of clothing in the house and even with the furnace cranked up to 80, I just could not get warm.

So what did I do?

I went in the bathroom and locked the door and lay on the floor. No, it's not what you think. I rummaged through the cabinet under the sink until I found the orange tube of Bain De Soleil. I unscrewed the cap, closed my eyes, and took in the rich aroma. Almost instantly I pictured myself on the sandy Miami Beach and felt warm all over.

And speaking of rich aromas, I suddenly feel the urge to walk downtown to Target -- I can almost smell the popcorn from here.